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AUTHOR Enos, Theresa
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ABSTRACT

"Verbal atom cracking," according to Kenneth Burke, entails a process where the reader reconstructs what the writer has constructed--a necessary process before the reader can begin deconstructing. Foregrounding opposites, rather than looking for apposites, may not be the best way to approach discourse that covers especially esoteric interdisciplinary territory. Looking for apposites involves "seeing from two angles at once"; thus all perspectives are incongruent. In rhetorical analysis, all elements are interconnected by the key word in Burke's system: identification. Reconstructing means searching for identifiable cues to the writer's motives. These are usually found by analyzing the form of a text. Burke discusses five aspects of form as: (1) progressive; (2) repetitive; (3) conventional; (4) minor or incidental; and (5) interrelational or overlapping. By identifying a variety of clusters by "reconstructing" them, the reader achieves textual identification. To find clusters, Burke says readers must look for "looping curves." These might take the form of key metaphors or representative anecdotes. Learning to revel in revision through reading, to see at various angles, to see that language functions by hierarchizing sets of terms, to see how both writers and readers idealize some categories and debunk others is a way of beginning to think, read, and perhaps write in terms of apposition rather than opposition. This is an effective way to approach teaching a seminar in rhetoric. (SAM)

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Theresa Enos
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"Verbal Atom Cracking": Burke and a Rhetoric of Reading

It's going to make this paper easier if some of you identify with the problem I had while teaching a 20th-century seminar in rhetoric in spring 1992. In the seminar I'd asked students to complete a section in their dialectical notebooks for each of the increasingly difficult readings as we progressed--or maybe a better word would be regressed--from some theorists whom we could read with some degree of assurance to poststructuralists whom we could hardly read at all. By semester's end I realized that the dialectical notebook, with the objective summary and then the subjective response--too often foregrounding opposites--was not the "tool" we needed to deal with discourse that took us into some pretty esoteric interdisciplinary territory.

From this experience I started thinking why not try the next time I teach this course the way Burke tells us he gets into a text--looking for apposites, not opposites--especially since my seminar includes a considerable amount of Burke. And since Burke remarked at the Seattle 4Cs that he wished we'd stop chasing him and just use him, I thought I'd keep trying to do this. At the following 4Cs when I chaired this session I'd asked for papers that could help us "use" Burke. I remember one paper in particular at that special session where Rick Coe showed us how as teachers of writing we might use Burke to help our students become wordlings--to empower with words. This evening I'd like to take another angle and talk about how as readers we might use Burke to help us "revise" difficult texts. I'm well aware of the risk I'm taking here, of your perspective that what I say is yet another example of Paul Bryant's description of us as too prone of rediscovering the same things--as he put it, like a rooster crowing every morning because he sees a brand new world every morning. I'll take that risk--and say with Huck Finn, "All right then, I'll go to hell.

Using Burke to guide us in what seem impossible poststructuralist texts to encode and decode entails a process where the reader reconstructs what the writer has constructed, a necessary process before the reader can begin deconstructing. The aim is, in KB's words, "verbal atom cracking," the ritual that readers, as performers, undertake as they enact a discourse. This is the way we derive our perspective, a perspective of "seeing from two angles at once"; thus, all perspectives are perspectives by incongruity. Verbal atom cracking may sound like dissociation, but Burke says it is identification because its effect is to blur differences and accentuate oneness,

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with oneness meaning a bringing together of various aspects of the most diverse things with a clash of identity.

Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, another way of getting at what Burke calls terministic screens. It seems to me that the processes of both reconstructing and deconstructing, like the process of constructing, set up terministic screens; they both are ways of seeing and not seeing. So how might the two-part reading process result in apposition, that is, seeing from a different perspective?

KB points out that the communicative functions of a text draws on the familiar communication triangle of writer-reader-work, except he calls it dream-prayer-chart, dream analogous to the writer's unconscious motives, prayer to communication between writer and reader, chart to the explicit situation contained in the work itself. The process of reading rhetorically would take Burke's dream-prayer-chart, which basically reveals the successive steps of creating a text, and reverse the process to chart-dream-prayer, that is, work-writer-reader, and move from the text outwardly to motives. This is rhetorical analysis, right?

But I think there's an added dimension to what we usually think of as rhetorical analysis in that all elements are interconnected by the key word in Burke's system: identification, where the ritualistic hierarchy he calls the "tragic rhythm of action" ends in some kind of identification. Reconstructing means searching for identifiable cues to the writer's motives. By identifying a variety of clusters by "reconstructing" them, the reader achieves textual identification.

Reconstruction, one way of creating identification with the text, is part of what Burke means by the dancing of an attitude; one way to find the "dancer," the activity, is to reconstruct the writer's activities--to do this gets us into form, and form, Burke says, is identical to psychology. Form is something expected by readers, and we expect it to fulfill desires we expected to be aroused in our reading, or in the anticipation of the reading. But in the case of the majority of the readings with which my students and I struggled, frustration fell between the expectation and the satisfaction, frustration stemming from the difficulties of textual delays, turns, and twists. No matter the theory we were reading, we were impelled to decode it, summarize it, tell each other what it "meant." We just couldn't seem to read in any other way despite our tenuous grasp of poststructuralist theory. (Maybe this is what Jane Tompkins meant when she remarked that poststructuralism can't really be applied. I've wondered, because like you I steep myself in rhetoric, then why bother with it at all.)

KB discusses five aspects of form, which we can use in looking at the text as "chart," that is, focusing on the text itself. The first aspect, progressive form, Burke subdivides into syllogistic and qualitative progression--syllogistic, meaning what we'd recognize as conventional

argument, a form that we recognize as demonstration where premises force the conclusion, and qualitative, meaning where the presence of a quality or idea prepares us for the introduction of another. We've been educated in reading scholarship, I think, to expect qualitative form. This is not the form we get in a lot of poststructuralist texts, thus making us feeling disoriented because we expect to be put into a state of mind wherein another state of mind can appropriately or naturally follow.

The second aspect of form is repetitive, the "consistent maintaining of a principle under new guises"--a restatement of the same idea in different ways ("The Nature of Form"). A lot of "conventional" rhetoric texts fit into this division, and we feel pretty comfortable with this kind of form, especially in reading rhetoric history from classical through the nineteenth century.

The third aspect of form Burke calls conventional--what a writer might use who wants to foreground form <u>as form</u>, an example being the familiar parts of classical discourse: exordium progressing to peroratio. Of course, we don't see this structure in poststructuralist texts.

The fourth aspect of form is minor or incidental form. Because this fourth form introduces metaphor, paradox, reversal, this is one we can look for in many of the difficult texts we now require ourselves to read.

The fifth aspect of form is interrelation or overlap of some of the previous four kinds of form. Whether we would find these forms useful in helping us find a way into a text I don't know, but I think it's worth a try. We might even come up with a different taxonomy when looking at texts in this rather new critical way.

Still working backward, the reader in reconstructing the process of symbolic action, becomes a five-person discussion group, taking all the speaking parts of Burke's pentad, his tool for entry into detailed analysis of factors at work. (I say discussion group because of the implication that the back-and-forth movement of conversation will ensure that the reader dialogically considers the ratios of the five terms. Burke even gives us further tools with which to work: in an <u>RSQ</u> article, "Dramatistic Invention: Two Contrasting Views," Charles Kneupper talks about Burke's notion that conservatives tend to argue from agent (the actor performing the act--Burke says psychology is a language which emphasizes the agent), liberals from scene (the background or situation--Burke says sociology is a language of scenes), realists from act (naming what took place--in thought or deed), pragmatists from agency (what means were used), mystics and idealists from purpose (motive or cause that lay behind a given act). Kneupper points out that "insofar as terms from these categories are central to the arguments of these various groups, it follows that they are also pivotal terms from which each group interprets reality and also that each group is not susceptible to argument centered from that term." Such a notion, carefully

considered and carefully used, could help form an interpretive method by which we can approach some of the impossible poststructuralist texts we have to deal with in the metadiscipline we know as rhetoric. The image I'd hope readers could come up with is the syncretic relationship among the terms--the image of syncretism that keeps coming to my mind is one Douglas Hofstadter talks about in his brilliant book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*: "mental representations of situations [which] involve frames nested within each other."

And by adding and focusing on KB's later addition to the pentad, attitude, which changes his Dramatistic method to a hexad, we can give even more emphasis to reconstruction. To get at motives, the situations underlying attitudes or strategies, we next turn to how the writer creates, or does not create, identification, so that we can see there is a movement from the text now explicitly to te writer. For attitude is more important than proof: we persuade someone insofar as we talk their language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, imagery. We might think of this sixth element as orienting the writer to the action he or she is contemplating.

To find clusters, look for curves, Burke says, looping curves. These might take the form of a key metaphor, for example, a representative anecdote. Beginnings and endings are significant to give the reader a pattern to go by, which of course is another kind of identification--titles, too, are important. Look for elements in a line or sentence: disclosures, contrasts, restatements with a difference, ellipses, images, aphorisms, sound-values. These line-by-line aspects that we call style are, Burke reminds us, form in their broader outlines.

From the intratextual identification the reader has gained through the process of reconstruction, that is, through form, relationality between and among the pentadic terms, and image clusters, the reader can now begin the ritual of deconstructing, attending to the gaps. And this is where the the focus is on prayer, that is, the reader enabling herself or himself to see from another angle-having moved through considerations of chart (the text) and dream (the writer). The pentadic terms, in particular, help us to conceptualize the strategic points at which ambiguities arise. The reader now takes especial note of Burke's important words that division is part of identification; the reader must begin to <u>look for</u> incongruities. Perspective by incongruities is gained by looking for the switching of a term from one context to another. This process entails exploring the metaphoric nature of strategies that have already been analyzed and interconnected and can lead to a revision--a fresh slant--of meanings of words. Deconstruction is the process by which the reader revises the text in order to <u>use</u> it. Perspective by incor ruities is more than style; it is an exhortation to see the limited nature of any one cognitive framework. It is a way of

recognizing the terministic screens that had shielded the reader from seeing the multiplicity of possibilities.

The reading schema I'd like to come up--and really don't think I have yet--is one that at some intersection joins the two kinds of terministic screens I've been exploring. For the result of Burke's method is to see from two angles at once. Like a stereopticon that lets us view two images that are nearly the same, but because they are taken from a slightly angular view, each has a different perspective. This is the model I like best for KB's universe building--constructed out of molecules containing diverse atoms, to extend the metaphor.

And just as we know that it's the ratios of the pentadic terms--or pentodes as I've heard them called--that are the most important, it's important to recognize that a Burkean rhetoric of reading is an ongoing process; it probably cannot be reduced to a linear, two- or three-part process. When we encounter some division, some gap, some discontinuity, we must retreat to a level of terms that allow for some kind of merger; then we can dance back to the division or gap and, we hope, see it anew. But of course, as Rick Coe points out, the reason we <u>can</u> see the gap <u>anew</u> is that <u>we are not the same</u>. We learn to revel in our re-vision through reading, to see at various angles, to see that language functions by hierarchizing sets of terms, to see how both writers and readers idealize some categories and debunk others, thus setting up relationships between affirmation and negation.

To Burke opposites are not so different after all; as readers, we can think in terms of apposition, not opposition. His perspective by incongruities is a kind of methodological oxymoron, to use Coleridge's term, of illustrating unity by fragmentary examples. Coleridge, whose method Burke drew from, about his own reading, says his thought in the process was like a kaleidoscope in attempting to reduce all the miscellaneous fragments into order. He said, "I would make a pilgrimage to the deserts of Arabia to find [someone] who could make me understand how the one can be many. . . . It seems as if it were impossible, yet it is [possible], and it is everywhere.

In a <u>Grammar of Motives</u>, Burke explains in his preface that he is searching not for "terms which avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise, a pretty neat summing up it seems to me of the purposes of the new rhetorics; indeed rhetoric is Janus-like, looking in two directions, one face toward theory, the other toward practice, a telling image of perspective by incongruities.

Tilly Warnock says, "We must ask the reader . . . merely to consider reading rhetorically as being on the track of something," so I think we can give up trying--if any of you or your students do--to even think we should make crystal clear the kinds of discourse we're now reading in our postmodern theory seminars. Certainly, it seems to make

sense to use Burke to help us come to terms with terms through reading poststructuralist discourse. Both Wayne Booth and Ross Winterowd have told us that Burke's dramatistic view of meaning would have preempted poststructuralists such as Derrida, Barthes, de Man if they had been aware of KB's published works--if they ever got around to reading him, they would've, or should've, moderated their claims to originality. But of course, we really could go back to Aristotle as the true father of symbolic action, for reading rhetorically, that is, ways of reading are <u>strategies</u> for encompassing situations. Language is inevitably selective and partial; it is a screen and cannot be a windowpane. And I find I seem to be illustrating Burke's own definition of perspective by incongruities--I'm walking like a sailor on dry land--so I'll be cowardly and retreat--and hope you have some suggestions for yet another perspective to help me on my way.